

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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The argument for community was best stated 400 years ago in a sermon by the English poet John Donne: "No man is an island, entire of itself; everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of the main, if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee."

Those words are moderately well known today as poetry, but, if we are to believe the recently departed leader of the federal opposition Mark Latham -and I believe his analysis of Australian society demands serious attention - the moral of Dr Donne's sermon is as redundant as the dinosaur. In so far as I share Latham's view, I would argue that what has been responsible for that development is the fact that for the past two decades the theory of the free market has been permitted to masquerade in this country as a social philosophy. To understand how that happened - how, at the same time, we went from being a society to being an economy, from being classified as citizens to being classified as consumers - I believe we have to have look at another subject not highly valued by consumer culture - history.

I come from Tasmania. One of the things that has always struck me about Victoria is how Victorian it is - and by Victorian I mean emblematic of the Victorian era. Tasmania is older. It's different. It's Georgian. When Tasmania, then called Van Diemen's Land, was first settled by whites, slavery was still legal in the British Empire. In fact, it was the world's biggest commodity trade and it was dominated by Britain. As representatives of local government it might interest you to know that when the anti-slavery movement got underway in Britain, 37 of the 41 holding seats on the council for the City of Liverpool were connected, directly or indirectly, to the slave trade. Two were co-owners of the infamous slave vessel, the *Zong* - in 1782, the captain of the *Zong* threw overboard 132 slaves, then claimed they had died of illness and filed an insurance claim on the basis that their loss represented the perishing of cargo at sea. A society which accepts slavery as a fact of life has a different consciousness from one that does not. In the course of one of the slavery debates in the British Parliament, a defender of the slave trade actually said across the floor: "Humanity is a private feeling. It has no place in the formulation of public policy". When the case of the *Zong* went to court, the English Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, said there was no issue of murder, that as far as the law was concerned there was no difference between throwing slaves overboard and throwing horses. Eventually, the slave trade was defeated, and what a magnificent story that is!

Slavery was an institution. Its lobby was the most politically potent of its day, not merely having the ear of politicians and champions like war hero Horatio Nelson and members of the Royal Family, but also actually owning seats in the parliament. Anyone who wearies of the struggle that is the battle to keep our society on a sane and balanced course should research the anti-slavery movement. Not only did they triumph over odds which, even by today's standards, are immense, they changed the tenor and direction of British politics for the next century and more. Suddenly, notions of humanity were part of public policy, there was a notion of human progress

and, to go with it, a reform movement which led to the extension of the franchise first to adult males and later to women, which ended child labour, which shone its light into subjects like prisons and the plight of ordinary British soldiers in wars like the Crimea. When the colony of Port Phillip adopted the name Victoria, it was not merely to escape the stigma attached to the older penal colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, it was to identify with a new and different notion of human progress whose champion in the City of Melbourne, Sir Redmond Barry, would be the force behind the establishment of the State Library and the University of Melbourne and the man who hanged Ned Kelly.

For well over 100 years - in fact, right up until our own time - the word reform continued to carry the meaning that emerged from the anti-slavery movement. Reform was a social and moral matter. Then, somewhere in the 1980s, almost without anyone noticing, the meaning of the word reform flipped. If terrorist is now the single most powerful word in our political vocabulary, the word which preceded it as such was reform. Suddenly, it meant nothing more or less than economic re-structuring and change was upon us like a giant combine harvester driven by this engine called reform and so much that we knew and took for granted, and in many cases valued, was suddenly stripped from us. In the process, although lip service was still paid to words like society and community, the reality is that the meaning of both words was altered radically. My own view is that the economic agenda of the hard Right which has swept all before it over the past 20 years, has never been popularly supported except where it has merged with the politics of race. This set of political beliefs, otherwise known in this country as economic rationalism, can actually be seen as a distant relative of communism and is inherently flawed for the same reason - both presume human beings are rational, materialistic beings. Both ignore or deny the fact that there is something at the centre of human beings which needs to be fed and nurtured, and that if this something doesn't grow in a positive way it will grow in a negative way, but whichever course it takes, its existence, its development, cannot be ignored. What I'm saying is that at the core of every community, every society, is a collective belief, a morale, and in this country, at this time, in that regard, I don't think we're in such good health.

What I assume, what I hope, is that we here today share is a belief in the principle of community. To argue for that publicly - certainly in urban politics - is to be seen as advancing a left-liberal position. It's seen as being on the idealistic side of politics. I reject that I see the human need for community as being utterly real. Two years ago, I did a story on a young couple on a family farm in the Wimmera where, I was told, dry years used to come once ever ten years and now come once every two or three. At the time, water storage levels in the Wimmera were around six percent. I came back to the city and did a straw poll among Melburnians I met asking them to guess the level of water reserves in the Wimmera. No-one got it. In fact, no-one got close. Back on the farm, where I had the sense of being on one of the frontlines of our changing world, the young farmer told me "without a sense of community you can't survive out here", that people from the city who come to the area looking for cheap houses didn't understand that and had to be told. I think in all sorts of ways, as a nation, Australia is about to be told.

I happen to believe global warming is a factor in the water shortage in the Wimmera. I know Tasmania is not as cold in winter as it was when I was a child. I see John Howard

as being one of those responsible for torpedoing the Kyoto protocol on global warming. You mayor may not agree with me but I still think you should be concerned that when Howard signed off on a deal on the Tasmanian forests and called himself a conservationist, no-one in the federal opposition or the national press took him up on it. My view is that Australia is suffering from what was known in Victorian times as lassitude. A lack of the vital energy necessary to good physical and mental health. It was partly to encourage that vitality that in 1858 the private schools of Melbourne played a game of football outside the window of where we are today and sparked the development of the sport we know today as Australian football. The impulse for such games came from Rugby school in England, particularly its headmaster Thomas Arnold, who saw that as a result of the Industrial Revolution the society around him was in a state of rapid transition and new ways were needed to teach values consistent with the new age. I believe we are now in a period of equally rapid transition; but I don't see us displaying Dr Arnold's vision or clear-sightedness. Our foreign national debt is \$50 billion a year yet the media tells the story of the economy through interest rates, a strictly domestic perspective. On the night of the last federal election, John Howard said Australia is now more respected in the world as a result of his government. I challenge anyone to attend an international conference and return with that view. In relation to Iraq, Australia is seen as having acted in a colonial manner. My guess is the gap between how Australians see themselves and how they are seen by the rest of the world is as large as it was in the 1960s. The best summary of our times I have seen is a CD title by the Sydney singer song writer Ben Lee: "Awake Is the New Sleep".

In this context, the loudest wake-up calls have heard in a long time - or perhaps one might even term it, a cry for help - are The Latham Diaries. A lot can be said about the diaries. At one level, they're like being inside the mind of a suicide bomber before he blows up the Mosque. Clearly, they provide a feast of gossip, but analyses of the book which go that far and no further are doing the Australian public a serious disservice. Politicians tell us as much as they want us to know. Journalists tell us as much as they can at any particular moment; often, that's not much. The Latham Diaries are one of those moments when someone says, "You want to know what I think, I'll tell you. You may not like me, I may not like you, but this is what I think". At the time of writing his diaries, Mark Latham was, in Henry Lawson's words, past caring - a man without restraint and lots of scores to settle. But he is also a social theorist. At one point, he actually says he only likes two sorts of people - basically, boys like himself who are tough and smart in a certain sort of Sydney way - and people who are interested in policy by which he means social reform policy. Latham has wounded the Labor Party deeply, perhaps fatally, but the importance of the book goes beyond that.

His analysis of Australian politics and society has the authority of one who spent a decade in or near the corridors of power, and fought the national drama of a federal election campaign. One of his conclusions is that the group he sought to woo, those he called the aspirational voters, don't care what happens to those beneath them once they have risen above them on the social ladder. Latham's saying we're a different Australia. The fair go has gone. Latham talks a lot about community. He goes running at night through his suburb. Nobody knows anybody. Latham says Australians are losing, or have lost, our sense of community. Last weekend, I was in Horsham, a town with a splendid sense of community, so in that important sense Latham is wrong. But in the future Latham may be right because the suburbs he equates with Australia, the sort in which he

lived, are the new ones on the outskirts of Sydney and Melbourne where federal elections are now won and lost and where, as we speak, our national vision is being forged.

But the significance of his book goes even further since Latham, the bright young man who entered parliament to advance the cause of social reform, basically thinks the cause of social reform - as distinct from economic reform - is dead; that the historical impulse which began in Britain 200 years ago with the anti-slavery movement has run its course; that, in certain respects, we are heading back to the early 19th century for our notion of politics, the matters with which government concerns itself, the matters it doesn't. We are, to quote the head of the UN Human Rights Commission, in a regressive phase of history. At the end of the 19th century, at the height of the Victorian era, it was thought that torture was a thing of the past. It's back; it even has advocates within our own universities. Throw in technology, globalisation, religious fundamentalism in the three codes of Islam, Christianity and Judaism and you have the principal agents of our time.

What gives me hope in this time is what has always given me hope. Last weekend, I found it in Horsham at the Awakenings festival to which more than 600 disabled people, some of them severely disabled, were brought from around Australia. On Saturday night, I attended a ball, facilitated by hundreds of volunteers from the local community, at which 35 disabled couples were presented in the manner of debutantes to a crowded town hall. I saw human dignity given and exchanged, I saw courage and gladness, and I saw human beings at their collective best. Try as I might, however, I have been unable, as a journalist, to get the festival the national media recognition it deserves. This is a time when we desperately need stories about the triumph of hope and perseverance - not soft stories about stories that are as hard as steel about Australia at its best so that we can again find values worth aspiring to, the sorts of values which explain why standing in this place at this time we believe ourselves to be a people distinct from any other, not through race, but through the accumulation of stories that happen over time and develop along certain lines. I want to live in an Australia that has the basic values I saw on display last weekend in Horsham. I don't want us to end up living like Mark Latham's bleak vision of the suburbs he jogged through at night where no-one knew anyone, where people sat inside taking their idea of each other from television shows, most of which are imported, in a culture where a person's contribution to civil society can go unrecognised but a brief appearance on an ephemeral television show can have you branded a celebrity. I believe there is a battle now to be fought over what it means to be Australian.

As a Tasmanian, I feel well placed to meet the great challenge of our time. The Georgian Age, I reckon, had a clear view of humanity. We are all flawed. If we recognise the flaw in ourselves and others, we will also see the good. Occasionally we may even see greatness. Tasmania in the 1830s had a far more vigorous press than Australia has in 2005. The great history of the island's early years - which detailed, among other things, the slick financial dealings which benefited the governor of the day George Arthur and his cronies - was written from the condemned cell at Hobart prison by a journalist named Henry Melville. Anyone sucked in by the Windshuttle version of Tasmanian history, which flourished in the local tabloid press, would also do well to read Melville's thoughts on the matter. He does not give figures of Aborigines killed or generally mistreated - what white man would be so stupid as to provide the figures when the reward for

doing so might have been the noose? - but his writing is informed by a clear knowledge about what was going on. The Georgians were gutsy types.

In the end, Mark Latham was thoroughly of our time. He exercised choice. He got out of politics. Those engaged in the struggles of the past did not always have the luxury of choice and nor, in the near future, may some of us. The new anti-terror laws make it an offence to bring the sovereign into ridicule or contempt. If that's the Queen, Gerry Connolley's in trouble. If it's the Howard government, then cartoonist Michael Leunig is the man to watch. We will be told this is not the ambit nor the intent of the laws and thus are brought back to the issue of trust. I don't trust the Howard government in this way. It may be that I don't trust any government in such an extreme way but I certainly do not trust a government that sends us to war on bogus grounds, never admits its error of judgment nor the part that war has played in inflaming global extremism.

This government now asks me to accept that, if I report on a man I believe to be innocent who is detained under their new laws, I should be imprisoned. Malcolm Fraser has described this as a Stalinist law and I agree. Therefore, in considering what you do and do not read in the Australian press in the future, I ask you to remember that "No man is an island, entire of itself; everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee."